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## RELIGIOUS ADVANCE IN FIFTY YEARS<sup>1</sup>

WILLIAM HERBERT PERRY FAUNCE  
Brown University

The present day might seem a most unfavorable time for calm review or for any attempt to see the past in true perspective. The earth-shaking events beyond the sea distort our vision and confuse our judgment, as a violent wind sweeping over a lake shatters the reflection of all objects on the shore. Yet at just such a time we may see most clearly, because the tremendous issues now forced upon the world release us from those petty questions which so often befog religious men. Superficial things are being sloughed off, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. Times of crisis should be times of understanding.

The most noteworthy element in the religious advance of the last fifty years is the general diffusion of the idea that advance in religion is desirable. Darwin's great book was published fifty-seven years ago—the work of one of the most modest, patient, open-minded men of the nineteenth century. As a result of his ideas—received at first with indignation, then with ridicule, then with quiet readjustment of old ways of thinking—we learned to think in terms of time rather than in terms of space. Religion before his day was largely spatial in its conceptions. It conceived the world as a finished article, heaven as a distant place, revelation as completed in an oriental province, the second coming as an apparition in the clouds, the final judgment as a geological upheaval and a rending of the sky. Such a world was pictured by Milton as though laid out with a pair of celestial compasses. By Bunyan it was conceived as a road leading from a City of Destruction to a Celestial City—both cities being fixed in position and unchangeable in character. Hence religion was static, an adjustment of one's self

<sup>1</sup> An address given on the occasion of the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago.

to events that occurred in Palestine or would yet occur in the sky. As heaven was beyond the reach of change, human life was admirable in proportion as it, too, became static. We need not stop to point out how Plato's city-state embodies the same conception of the ideal city as one that has attained, and so has no need to grow.

But with the gradual infiltration of the idea that the world is the result, not of fiat, but of process, came a new and vitalizing conception of religion itself as a progress, an unfolding, a forward-looking and upward-striving power. Spatial conceptions—the lost Eden, the Solomonic temple, the cloud that received Him out of their sight, the city that had twelve gates great and high—began to seem inadequate to religious aspiration. Temporal suggestions, long overlooked in the Scriptures—"after a long time the Lord of those servants cometh," "first the blade, then the ear"—began to glow with new meaning. Religion, instead of expecting release through a geological catastrophe, began to expect a slow development, a resistless advance, and a glorious conquest of the world that now is. Once men had said: Whatever is unchangeable is divine. Now they began to say: Whatever is marked by ceaseless unfolding in forms of beauty and truth and power of human service, is divine. Thus the most notable progress was in making the idea of progress at home in the religious consciousness of our generation. The idea of evolution has been called by one of our teachers an "opium pipe" to lull the church to sleep. Rather would I call it a bugle call, a summons to move as God is moving, to march with the stars that fight for us. Henceforth we are not to live "hastening to the day of God," as the Authorized Version said; but to live as "hastening the day of God"—a very different matter.

The first result of this new conception of progress was a new joyousness in the expression of religious faith. The hymnology of fifty years ago seems to us now like a suit of clothes outgrown. The old hymns were peculiarly plaintive. A mild and pensive melancholy was then the note of spirituality. We sometimes wonder that Lincoln could select as his favorite poem, "O, why should the spirit of mortal be proud?" But we forget that the note of disillusionment and resignation was then the mark of all spiritual aspiration. "There is rest for the weary," was the opening hymn

at many a church service. "I'm a pilgrim and I'm a stranger" was sung by little children. "A fleeting show for man's delusion given" was the accepted verdict of the church on the world.

But whoever enters any religious convention today hears at once hymns of a new virility and joyousness. The world is no longer merely to be escaped, it is to be transformed. It is not a fleeting show, but a battlefield where victory may be delayed but is absolutely sure. In 1855 Mr. Beecher shocked Christian sentiment by including in his *Plymouth Hymnal* some serene and optimistic poems of John G. Whittier. Since then the church has searched all the songs of all the singers for the expression of its victorious faith, and the songs of the church, having passed through their wailing period, have returned to the earliest type, heard at Philippi when Paul and Silas sang at midnight until the prison doors fell open. The Christian hymnology of the twentieth century is much nearer to that song in the Philippian jail than it is to the mediaeval *Dies Irae*, as our conception of the Christian life is much more in sympathy with the first epistle to the Corinthians than it is with Dante or Milton or Bunyan. In its singing, at least, the church is getting "back to Christ."

But the real change of these fifty years lies deeper than any imagery or any series of conceptions. It lies in the general preference for the psychological approach to reality in place of the old dogmatic approach. We were made perfectly familiar with the dogmatic method in our childhood. In the ancient creeds formulated by the church, or in the ancient Bible dictated by inspiration, were certain pronouncements of doctrine. "Whosoever will be saved, it is necessary that he believe"—so began the famous formula. The Puritans of New England revolted from those historic creeds, but the credal approach they believed to be indispensable. The *New England Primer*, of which three million copies were printed in one hundred and fifty years, contained the shorter catechism and the whole Puritan theology. Those men gave to their children unchanging, infallible statements of historico-metaphysical fact as the indispensable basis of a good life. These statements, coming down from inspired sources, were incapable of improvement and needed only explication and assent.

But the great change that has come over the church is the loss of interest in this whole dogmatic approach. Whether the formulas be true or false does not seem to us so vital as to our fathers. Not only have we ceased to contend over the ancient distinction of *homo-ousion* and *homoi-ousion*, but the debates over imputation versus impartation, over plenary versus verbal inspiration, over "nature" and "person," all seem to us curiously unreal. It is not because one side has outargued the other, but because both have lost interest in the struggle. It is as if two contending armies had simultaneously discovered that they were fighting over shadowy issues, and had walked off arm in arm to another battlefield to face another and a common foe. We have learned to ignore some things for which our fathers fought—as Jesus of Nazareth ignored one of the hottest controversies of his time and quietly said: "Neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem shall men worship." The psychological approach has lifted us into a new atmosphere, as the aeroplane enables the operator to look down on the hosts contending in the battlefields below him. We may call the new approach the historic method, or pragmatism, or realism, or what we will. For the religious life of the multitude it means finding out how ancient conceptions originated and then asking what their value is for the development of character today.

For example, the rank and file of our churches are not interested in discussing the heresies alleged of Horace Bushnell and Albert Barnes and Charles Augustus Briggs. Those famous trials are "burnt-out craters healed with snow." We regard the once fiercely defended propositions as "value judgments" to be replaced by deeper insights today.

The forgiveness of sins, once a forensic process, is now interpreted as an inner experience, a change in the consciousness of God and man. The second coming, once a stupendous spectacle, has become a far more significant entrance of Christ into the consciousness of humanity—his immergence in the thinking and hoping and toiling of the entire world.

This psychological approach is the characteristic note of modern preaching. Phillips Brooks's most famous sermon, "The Candle of the Lord," is simply an attempt to show how the human per-

sonality is the supreme expression and necessary limitation of the divine message. Those who were brought up to admire the preaching of Canon Liddon felt a strange sense of insecurity when listening to Phillips Brooks. But the church at large felt that Liddon's method was already antiquated and that Phillips Brooks was turning

A keen untroubled face  
Home to the instant need of things.

This new approach has transformed our idea of religious education. Life itself has become an education, including "probation" as a necessary element in the endless process. In teaching our children we are trying to come at truth from the child's point of view rather than from that of the writer of Deuteronomy or of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

This new point of view has profoundly affected our attitude toward religious denominations. The movement toward Christian unity has advanced by leaps and bounds. We have learned that denominational divisions are sometimes the result of temperament rather than conviction, sometimes based upon contentions which no longer seem vital. We perceive that no denomination can endure if based merely upon liturgical or ceremonial forms. When denominational barriers have proved too rigid to admit the new life of our times, that life has gone outside and created new organizations. The Men and Religion Forward Movement, the Laymen's Missionary Movement, the Edinburgh Conference with its continuation committees, the proposed World-Conference on Faith and Order—all these are signs of the times, clearly showing that the larger unity of Christendom will either be allowed expression through existing denominations or, being refused passage, will find independent expression and will pour the new wine into new bottles.

This point of view has given us a new conception of the great ethnic faiths; it has created the science of comparative religion. The difference is not that we have come to see some truth in other religions—we have always admitted that. It is rather that we have come to see the human processes by which other races have reached the truth. The oriental standpoint has become for us not only a fact, but an intelligible fact. We have come to see how it is possible

for men to see through a glass darkly—to worship a quiescent being like Buddha, or a hideous being like Kali, or a sportive deity like Siva.

In short, we no longer think of religion as a set of propositions to be defended, but as a great human process—the search after God and the finding of God in a transforming and regenerating experience. It means finding God often in strange places, under alien skies, by unconventional methods, and through unconsecrated channels. For fifty years the Christian church has been making novel discoveries of the divine and crying out: “Surely the Lord is in *this place*, and I knew it not!” What Professor Hocking calls “the tyranny of the religious idea” has given place to joy in the religious experience, whether our own experience or that of our fellow-men.

The real peril involved in this transition we cannot disguise if we would. The dogmatic method gave a sense of authority which the psychological approach has not yet attained. When the world was conceived as a system of divine government, and salvation as a forensic process, there was at least a profound sense of sovereign power at the heart of the universe. Under such a theology there was a spirit of reverence and obedience now often totally lacking, just as under imperialism and militarism we may cultivate soldierly virtues which it is difficult to produce in a democracy. Popular faith has sometimes been bewildered by the transition from exterior to interior authority. The education of our children has been made more difficult by the transition from picturesque and dramatic images to the inwardness of really spiritual conceptions.

But we cannot falter on that account. A more spiritual faith seems at first in every age of the world a nebulous and nerveless faith. So it was when Jesus refused to indorse either Gerizim or Moriah; worshiping “in spirit and in truth” seemed vague and disappointing to both Jews and Samaritans. So Paul grieved both parties when he cried, “Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision, but a new creation.” In every age spiritual advance has involved the relaxing of dogma. With this comes the danger of the loosening of life, but with it also comes the joy of a new inspiration in living.

We need not dwell on the results of the psychological method as applied to the study of the Bible, for the facts are known to all. Always the Bible has been recognized as a historical account, but strange to say the historical process through which the truth entered into the souls of the writers has been ignored, or conceived as a miraculous event having no relation to the method by which men find truth today. But modern Biblical scholarship has changed all that. It has for the more thoughtful section of the church enormously strengthened faith in the value and power of the Scriptures, and for the thoughtless section, always the largest, it has seemed to dissolve the voice of God into many human echoes.

For the thoughtful Christian of today faith in the Bible is vastly easier than fifty years ago. The ostentatious attacks of Robert Ingersoll which made our fathers shiver and quake would be quite impossible today. He now seems like a crusader against windmills. The attack of Professor Huxley on the Gadarene swine seems no longer a tragedy, but much nearer a comedy. No longer do we desperately strive to reconcile Genesis and geology, but we rather rejoice in the two conceptions of the cosmos, the prophetic and the scientific. No more are we troubled by contradiction between the morality of Joshua and that of the Sermon on the Mount, but we accept the inconsistencies as marks of progressive revelation. The church of today is not so certain of all parts of its Bible as was the church in the days of Finney and Spurgeon. But it is getting from the Bible vastly more ethical inspiration, more knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth, closer sympathy with his apostles, more light on ever-present problems than the older generation dreamed of. If the Bible is no longer a complete illumination of the universe, it is in a deeper sense than ever before "a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

But no review of the half-century can fail to notice the marked advance in ethical standards, both extensive and intensive. The ethical demand now covers a section of life once looked upon indifferently, and it requires far higher attainment. We have thus discovered new sins and created new virtues.

Is it true that the sense of sin has died out, or died down, in the modern world? That depends on what we mean by the sense



of sin. If we mean that sense of impending wrath which sometimes drew our fathers from their beds in the night and flung them to their knees in agony of contrition and remorse, then indeed we are right. That fear of wrath has dwindled in the minds of men. But if we mean the sense of dissatisfaction with all one's past, the sense of moral failure, the hunger for rightness within and for right relation to one's fellow-men, then the sense of sin is peculiarly characteristic of the present day. The sense of social sin, municipal sin, national sin has been growing each year more pungent and compelling. If the sense of fear is less acute, the sense of hunger is more urgent. If desire to escape no longer drives us, the desire to attain has become more intense and eager. The appeal of the most prominent evangelist now on the American horizon is primarily an ethical appeal. His theology is mediaeval, and has nothing to do with his success. Men forget his outworn theology as they are seared and transfixed by his tremendous drives into the human conscience. They rise up in horror, not at the vision of an offended judge of all the earth and a last grand assize, but at the sudden vision of their own meanness, their social treachery, their moral leprosy, when brought face to face with the purity and splendor of the character of Christ. They flock to the "sawdust trail," ignoring the mediaeval history and philosophy of the preacher, and summoned by the conviction of a righteousness which might be theirs and which they have miserably failed to attain. They scarcely hear Mr. Sunday's doctrine of a forensic transaction, but they eagerly respond to his announcement of an incarnation of the Eternal in Jesus of Nazareth and of a possible incarnation in each of his followers.

The truth is that we have been through a far-reaching revival of religion in America and do not yet know it. When Nineveh was summoned to repentance it put on sackcloth and ashes. When Pittsburgh a few years ago was convicted of sin—the sin of caring more for making steel than for making men—it did something very much more to the point. It appointed a Mayor's Commission, it employed landscape gardeners, it planned to cover the scarred and blackened hillsides with decent homes for its workers, it underwent a more genuine repentance than any that Nineveh

could conceive. And other American cities have followed. Social surveys are the modern equivalent of the old "self-examination."

"When ye pray say 'Our,'" is the old injunction. We are learning to say "Our," not only when we pray, but when we toil, when we plan our cities, and make our laws. That fever in the tenement house is our fever, and, if we neglect it, will come creeping down the street and enter our dwelling. That girl that has gone wrong in the streets is our girl, and her fall is part of the fall of a social order which tolerates or produces her. We are returning to the conceptions of the Book of Acts, and to the time when the primitive Christian faith poured out its spiritual energy in a social movement, in the reconstruction of the social order.

This return has involved what Principal Fairbairn calls "a new feeling for Christ." In no respect have the fifty years brought greater change than in the attitude of the church toward its Lord. In my father's library—the usual library of the minister of the last generation—were many works on philosophy and theology, many acute discussions and defenses of the faith, but only one *Life of Christ*, that by Samuel J. Andrews. No other life of Christ was then accessible in English. Such lives were not felt to be needful, Christ was then a representative figure, an official in a transaction, but hardly a person whom we could know as we know Luther or Wesley. His followers gave him unbounded adoration and devotion, but not acquaintance. But in these fifty years scores of lives of Christ have been written, and men have explored every clue to discover his opinions on the family, on our duty to the state, on prayer, on the hereafter, on the problems of labor, on all the characteristic tasks of human society. The result is that the striving, struggling world has a conscious sympathy for the ideals of Jesus such as no previous generation has known, and an insight into his purpose which is the great dynamic of our civilization.

The discovery of new sins has accompanied each new religious insight. There is less emphasis today on personal correctness of deportment, more emphasis on the industrial and fiduciary virtues. We understand what W. T. Stead meant when he said of James Russell Lowell: "He taught me how to hitch on the newest philanthropy to the old story of Calvary." But philanthropy does not

need to be "hitched on," it needs only to blossom out of religion. The sense of social trusteeship has spread throughout the modern world. Service on boards of directors is no longer a nominal matter. Public office has become a public trust. Social science has become a social gospel, and constantly dreams of a millennium. Political economy, no longer the "dismal science," is shot through with human quality and is indulging in bright-colored dreams.

The social interpretation of Christian truth has extended in every direction. We conceive God now, not only as transcendent over the cosmos, but as immanent in the social process. We find him in the sense of social obligation far more clearly than in the thunder and the rain. We echo again the word of Diderot: *Elargissez Dieu*. We find him not only in the evening star and in the flower in the crannied wall, but in the cry of the poor and the oppressed and in the gropings of men after a fairer social order. Our generation may not be able to claim the blessing of the pure in heart, but it may surely expect the blessing of those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.

The church in general has not adapted its worship to these new ideas. Its utterance steadily lags behind its life. Still we pray and sing mainly in the categories of transcendence. We work indeed as if God were in his world, but we worship as if he were an absentee who must be entreated to return. One vital task now before the church is to make its formulas and its hymns reflect its new faith in a God immanent in the unfolding life of humanity.

Here again we encounter an obvious peril. This perception of the divine presence in all things, this hallowing of the secular, involves a change in the modes of religious expression which is to many devout and simple minds most bewildering. There is more of vital Christianity in the world today than ever before, but it is seeking and finding novel channels for its utterance. It is like a mighty and restless river, which veers and lurches and suddenly carves out for itself a new channel. The houses built beside the old river bed are still standing, but they are uninhabited. The old wharves are there, but no steamers call—the mighty river and the mighty life it creates have moved away.

The oldest meeting-house in Providence, built in 1775, was made to seat 1,400 people, at a time when the total population was less than 5,000 souls. The church was then not only the sanctuary, but the forum, the lecture platform, the news bureau, the central telephone exchange, the clearing-house of the community. Ninetenths of the life that then surged through the church has now found other channels. Charity has created its own instruments. Philanthropy has planned huge organizations. Education has achieved its widespread apparatus. The Christian message is carried by printing press and electric wire and by "the sightless couriers of the air." The Christian school is taking over much of the work once done in the Christian home, and the Christian college is molding men as once the church alone could mold them.

Saul is not only among the prophets today, but he often outpreaches the prophets themselves. Literature has become one of the main avenues of Christian truth. The popular magazine spreads before us illustrated articles on Palestine, on biblical cities, on the meaning of Christmas and the Easter festival. Even the drama, in *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* and kindred plays, delights to picture the influence of a silent, shadowy figure that suggests the Prophet of Nazareth. G. K. Chesterton charges against our idols in frontal attack, and Bernard Shaw punctures them from behind.

New prophets of the faith arise in unexpected places. Just when some men were ready to repudiate religious "conversion" as no longer necessary, came William James, affirming that all the great leaders of humanity were "twice-born men." Just when some men began to think that the divinity of Christ was hardly tenable came Sir Oliver Lodge with his reminder that in the "subliminal consciousness" may dwell the fulness of the Godhead. In the last generation the most powerful pleas for the perpetual study of the Bible were made by Matthew Arnold and Thomas H. Huxley. In our own generation, just when we are beginning to deprecate all crisis in the life of the individual or the church, comes De Vries with his doctrine of mutation as the mark of true life. When our pulpits hesitate to affirm the perpetuity and power of the church,

then Josiah Royce unfolds the eternal necessity of the "religious community." Just when the church stammers and hesitates in its proclamation of a life to come, then arises Myers and offers in bulky volumes to demonstrate survival of the human personality after death. The clearest voices in defense of Christian truth today are often heard outside of all Christian temples, and the sturdiest supporters of Christian principles and motives are often those not classified with any section of the Christian church.

All this is heartening and inspiring. But it forces upon us an immensely serious problem. It is the success of the Christian faith which now imperils it. It is the victory of the church which may mean its absorption. Can the church compete with the organizations itself has created? Can Christianity control the spirits it has evoked? Will the church remain the center of hope and joy and inspiration to the struggling world? Or will it give way to the innumerable associations it has energized, to the social leaders it has inspired, to the ethical movements it has generated? Shall Christianity be devoured by its own children, or shall it show itself mightier than all its transient offspring? If it is to survive, it must refuse to change its nature. It must hold itself more sacred, more divine, than any of the changing channels through which it flows. It must refuse to be dissolved into poetry, into sociology, into civic betterment, or any other partial goods. It must decline to be sidetracked into public playgrounds or cheap lodging-houses. These are its fruit, but never its roots. It must keep the soul on top. It must master the powers it has let loose on the world. It must rise above all its varying expressions and remain, as it has been in all its most triumphant days, at once the power of God and the wisdom of God.